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ABSTRACT

Anne Haas Dyson's concept of the "child collective" and Colette Daiute's concept of "youth genres" can be useful observational frameworks for better understanding classroom dynamics. In studying classrooms where children are given opportunities to collaborate, Dyson's "child collective" identifies those behaviors that children use to express their own identity in classrooms, which allow children the freedom and flexibility to communicate and interact freely. Similarly, Daiute observes that children have their own means of communicating among themselves, which include the following approaches: (1) playfulness; (2) experimentation and approximation; and (3) affection (i.e., raising of voices, giggling). In observing their own classrooms, teachers will notice that their students indeed have their own means of communicating among themselves. For instance, one group of kindergarten students who were playing a detective game had developed "secret files," which were coded so that only they could read them. A number of transcribed conversations among students furthermore shows them identifying and sharing common problems as "kids." The challenge to teachers is to structure classrooms so that students have the opportunity to use exploratory language and to construct knowledge. In an important study, William Corsaro emphasizes the importance of teachers setting up boundaries within which a peer culture can develop. (TB)

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The Language of Classroom Democracies: Assessing Language and Learning Within the Student Culture

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The Language of Classroom Democracies: Assessing Language and Learning Within the Student Culture

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. In fact, the principle of free speech is essential to our society's well-being. Ironically, it is in the typical elementary classroom where children's voices are first stifled. The language of the classroom is often teacher directed; and when children are afforded the opportunity to talk, it is often solely on the teacher's terms--answering questions or discussing assigned topics. Children need to experience the satisfaction of self-expression throughout their school experience. Language is a tool for learning, and through language children learn about their world, themselves, and others.

Literacy educators stress that language is essential to a child's cognitive growth (Cazden, 1988, Wells, 1986). Spontaneous talk among peers allows children to expand their already existing conceptual scheme of the world. Courtney Cazden (1988) explains that spontaneous, exploratory talk is most likely to occur in discussions that take place among one's peers. There is a growing awareness of the importance of exploratory talk among literacy educators (Newkirk, 1992, Gussin Paley, 1981, Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991). As a result, classrooms are moving toward more democratic classroom language structures that allow children the freedom to make choices about how and with whom they will interact. It is in such settings that children are given the power to determine, to some extent, the course and content of their own discussions, and, consequently their learning. If we believe in the educative power of talk then we need to look more closely at classrooms where it flourishes. This exploration will enable us to assess the language opportunities that we provide our students and provide needed direction in implementing appropriate instruction.

What measures can be taken to structure the learning setting to insure that meaningful and instructional social interactions will take place? First, it is important to consider how we organize classrooms so that these kinds of spontaneous, playful language interactions can thrive-- are there. Next, we should consider the role of the teacher within the student's culture and decide to what extent she will. We need to understand how teachers can foster peer interactions that allow students to have a part in constructing their own meaning. We need to be able to assess what's happening in the peer culture in

order to better facilitate learning experiences, to remain aware of individual progress, and to determine appropriate instructional interventions.

Briefly, I'd like to review two frameworks for viewing social learning in the classroom- Anne Haas Dyson's 'child collective,' and Collette Daiute's 'youth genre.' I'll share how these frameworks can be used to interpret peer interactions in the classroom and discuss their practical for classroom organization. Then, I'll describe what the role of the teacher might be in assessing children's social learning, and provide practical suggestions that might help teachers design a child-centered assessment program.

WHAT DO "KID'S" CLASSROOMS LOOK LIKE?

"The Child Collective"

Anne Haas Dyson (1988) has contributed to our understanding of how spontaneous discussions among working peers contribute to learning. She investigated the ways children unintentionally help each other when they engage in exploratory talk with peers during writing. Dyson argues that children's "time off task" and their spontaneous talk are important features of the classroom dynamic. In studying classrooms where children are given opportunities to collaborate, Dyson has identified those elements of the classroom culture that represent the identity of "kids." She refers to those features as the "child collective." These are the behaviors that children use to express their own identity in classrooms which allow children the freedom and flexibility to communicate and interact freely. Elements of the "child collective" include: Engaging in collective or joint actions; activating a group memory; reacting or responding to school procedures and activities; and identifying and sharing their common problems as kids. The child collective naturally emerges as the definitive classroom culture. In these classrooms, newly learned literacy skills represent competencies that children value; they also serve as the social tools children can use to connect with, and distinguish themselves from, peers. Teachers can use the framework of the "child collective" in order to better understand instances of peer communication that occur in the classroom.

"Youth Genre"

Colette Daiute demonstrated how the spontaneous discussions among peers doing collaborative writing contributed to writing improvement. She studied the discussions of children whose writing showed significant improvement over a period of time and identified the features of those discussions that contributed to growth. Recognizing the importance of spontaneous exploratory talk for learning, Daiute argues that educators should try to understand the features of children's language that characterizes it as being unique from other speech genres in order to better understand learning settings and children's involvement within them. In the September '93 issue of Language Arts, Daiute proposed that educators begin to view the actions and behaviors of children engaged in academic settings through the framework of 'Youth Genres." She offers the term in an effort to help educators understand the unique developmental and socio-cultural perspectives that young children bring to their classrooms. Because they are members of communities and cultures within a greater social context that is dominated by adults, children will exhibit increasing awareness of conventional ways to think and act according to cultural definitions. But by virtue of the fact that, 1) our students are children, and 2) they view the world from their own unique developmental perspectives, their way of perceiving and communicating is unique. The work of socio-linguists throughout the past two decades has contributed to our understanding of how children continually strive to construct meaning from the culture of which they are a part. But Daiute points out that the speech genres of those adult social worlds that children are a part of are not sufficient to represent the youth perspective. She argues that the socio-cultural framework for examining literacy involvement should be broadened to include a more direct developmental perspective which would account for child like behaviors.

Speech genres can be used to characterize a class or a category of language used by a group of people- they have specific form and content that are unique to the community. People within the communities understand each other, whereas outsiders lack communicative competence within the community. Daiute identifies several specific features of children's language interactions that help to distinguish the 'Youth Genre,' the way that children communicate, from other speech genres. Through her own research on children's social construction of literacy, Daiute has identified several

elements that characterize children's speech as being different from adults. These include: 1) Responsiveness and Mutuality--children of differing developmental levels adjust the level of the communication interaction so that the interaction is successful. For example, an older child seems to be naturally able to respond to a younger child's needs. 2) Playfulness--Children are naturally playful in their communicating. 3) Experimentation and Approximation--Children constantly adopt behavior and communication conventions of their member culture. These attempts are done in experimental ways, and the results of their efforts are usually approximations of the forms they attempted. 4) Affect--Children's communication is characterized by the use of affect. For example, they raise voices, giggle, mimic. 5) Meaning Making--Children constantly endeavor to make sense of the larger social world of which they are a part. She goes on to point out that they are not absolute frames. All elements of 'youth genre' aren't necessarily present during every language interaction, and children continually experiment with different speech genres characteristic of other cultural domains-- in other words, they overlap other speech genres. Youth genres change across age groups, for instance, as children mature they employ various features of the genre in differing degrees. Finally, youth genre differs from adult speech genres.

COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

I would like to illustrate the ways that the 'child collective' and 'youth genres' can be useful observational frameworks for better understanding classroom dynamics. As a teacher researcher in my kindergarten classroom, I sat in on discussions among classroom peers as they interacted around their writing. I'd like to share an experience in order to point out some of the features I just identified and how they play an important role in the classroom culture.

David was six at the time of my study. He was the only child of a professional father and a full-time mother. He came to kindergarten already a reader. Initially, the writing he produced consisted solely of lists of numbers and words he knew how to write correctly. When I urged him to attempt to compose a message, he resisted saying he didn't know how to write enough words. But soon after the first week of school he began a story about a zoo. And as the year progressed writing time was transformed into a daily

opportunity to use newly acquired writing knowledge and skills and to connect with peers as a resourceful and playful friend.

David's daily writing topic most often centered around some type of play which involved his friends. Late in October I noted in my journal that he and a friend had been involved in a police game for several weeks. One day I observed David and two classmates making telephones out of paper and using them in their game, "Mr. Hazard Bomb and Mr. Pencil Eraser," in which they were all police officers solving a crime. Each of the boys was busy making telephones and compiling files--square pieces of paper with their own writing-- which contained information on each case. On November 20 I observed them making "secret files." They were writing in code- which meant David wrote the message backwards- and hid them around the room so, "If the bad guys find 'em they can't read 'em."

This is an example of how three children independently initiated and participated in an ongoing enactment of "play police." Within a socio-cultural framework it is clear that David was adopting the literary conventions of this social and cultural context. But his method can be characterized as playful. Mr. Hazard Bomb and Mr. Pencil Eraser could not have emerged from the planbook of a teacher- admittedly, least of all my own.

The series of playful interactions illustrate elements of the Dyson's child collective: the boys were engaged in the joint activity of play police; periodically, throughout a month long time period, different members would activate the group' 'play police' memory. What's more, the 'youth genre' framework can be used to help us understand the speech the children used to participate. It is characteristic of other children at a similar developmental level: they were responsive to each other; they were playful; they constructed their own meaning; and they experimented with reading and writing using their own approximations of writing conventions.

To further detail salient elements of the communication between peers within the classroom culture, I'll share transcriptions of first graders' language interactions (Miller, 1988) and discuss what some of the domains of children's academic discourse that we've been discussing are present. The first transcript shows a groups of children chatting about a science topic--evolution. The transcript illustrates how children casually discuss a science-related topic, and do so in a way that is natural and typical of children at their developmental level (first grade).

Transcript #1 *'Youth Genre' overlapping other speech genres...*

A group of children are chatting before going out for morning recess about evolution:
boy 1: Yeah, we were like from the sea. You couldn't even see us.
girl: Yeah, they we volved. We volved from monkeys.
boy 1: It was like we were formed. we volved.
girl 2: Yeah, and we were from monkeys. Monkeys are part monkey, but they're also part human.

The next example illustrates how children discuss those issues that are relevant to them. These types of discussions are important to children, and should be considered relevant and appropriate for classroom language interactions.

Transcript #2 *Identifying and sharing common problems as 'kids'*

A group of children are sitting together at a cluster of six desks during morning writing time.
Paul: I don't know what to write about.
Sally: Yeah, but you already wrote something yesterday (Ming and Susan join the table)
Ming: Oh, yeah, now I remember. What was I going to write about? Seasons.
Sally: (to Sarah) Tell me what to write about. Just tell me what to write about.
Sarah: I don't know.
Eugene: Bummer!
Susan: I know but I won't tell.

The following transcript reveals one example of how children typically react to a school procedure. Through these types of discussions, children work build a relationship with the larger classroom culture and acquire an understanding of their place within it.

Transcript #3 *Responding to school activities/ encountering teacher boundaries*

Paul has just shared his tiger scouts story, with no pictures, and has asked for questions or comments.
Joshua: I like your [mumbles]
Paul: What?
Joshua: I like your pictures.
Paul: Jimmy?
Jimmy: I like the part where you said, "Tigers or questions?"
Brad: I like the pictures.
Gwen: There is no pictures [giggles]
Paul: Oh, thank you. [giggles]
Teacher: Paul, do you have pictures?
Paul: Uh, no.
Teacher: Then I don't understand...
Ming: I mean I like his words.
Teacher: Then that's what you need to say.

Ming: I like your words.
Teacher: You like his writing, or you like the way he puts his words together. But it doesn't make too much sense to say you like his pictures if he doesn't have any.
Paul: I know. Caus I don't have any pictures. I don't have any pictures.
Teacher: Any more comments or questions for Paul about his writing? Thank you for sharing, Paul.
Boy: [whispers and giggles] I like your pictures.

The next example reveals how children respond to one another using affective resources.

Transcript #4 *Affect, mutuality and responsiveness*

The class is gathered on the rug for a whole group story sharing session. Megan shares her story.
Megan: Okay, "I'm a little dog. I like to play. That's what I do everyday. I love to jump over rocks, especially when the sun's out. I love dog food." I don't love dog food, but my dog does!
TJ: You don't have a dog!
Megan: I know!
TJ: Then why do you say my dog does?
Megan: Cause in the story it is my dog.
Eugene: Do you have a dog?
TJ: Are you going to get one?
Megan: I was going to get a dog, and my choices were a brown shaggy dog, but I made a choice and that's not my choice now, my choice is a dog that points.
TJ: Oh, is it also a guard dog?
Megan: No. Ming?
Ming: One time when we were just coming out of our barn from our house we eated like this treat for a dog. It was dog food. And me and my brother tasted it.
Children: E-you!!! [childhood expression of excited disgust--hard to transcribe phonetically]
Girl: I had cat food!
Ming: I know, one time I did too. It tasted like rotten bread.
Children: E-you!!! Yuc!
Girl: You can smell what it tasted like
TJ: I can smell the taste of marigolds. They smell like tomatoes.
Megan: Nick?
Nick: How did you get the idea?
Megan: Partly because I'm going to get a dog and a couple days ago I thought it might be a brown shaggy dog but I know it's not now so but that gave me the idea. Kelly?
Kelly: I like the way you make your dogs.
Megan: Thanks. Brad?
Brad: Whenever I don't eat all my eggs my mom gives them to my dog.
Megan: What's her name? Claudia?
Claudia: I like the picture.
Megan: Thanks. You had your hand up. Did you want to ask something?
Linda: My friend Shannon--she east kitty food.
Children: E-you!!!
TJ: What's it taste like?
Linda: I don't know.
Ming: One time when we were watching TV and Mygyver was eating dog food.

Ming: Mygyver was eating dog food.
TJ: Mygyver?
Ming: Yeah, on TV I saw him.
TJ: I saw the first time they met--his friend.
Jimmy: One time me and my brother was watching TV--my brother was, eating dog food sticks.
Children: E-you.
Ming: That's what I was eating when we came out of the shed.
TJ: What gave you the idea to eat that?
Ming: Do you know what my brother was doing when he tasted it? He said yummy yummy give me some more for dessert.. Because he liked them so much, especially with mustard.
Children: E-you!!! Yuk.
Teacher: I think we need to stop now. That was a good share this morning. Very nice sharing.
Megan: Good thing that you chose me cause everyone was starting to talk about dog biscuits.

CHILDREN'S WAYS OF COMMUNICATING: CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

Examining children's language interactions through the frameworks of the "child collective" and "youth genre" can help us better understand our students' communication perspectives. Now I'll take a look at the implications for our classrooms.

In order to be able to structure the learning setting in ways that recognize the unique developmental needs of children, it is important to address the following questions:

1. How do we organize classrooms so that children have opportunities to use exploratory language in order to construct knowledge?
2. What is the role of the teacher in helping children construct knowledge. How can they foster productive peer interactions?
3. How can we assess what's happening in classrooms where social learning occurs.

In order to answer these questions, I'll turn to the work of William Corsaro. Corsaro (1985) did a year-long study focusing on the peer culture of a pre-school. He examined how children use social skills to build their own peer culture, and how they, in turn, use that culture to learn. In the setting which he studied, the children were active in constructing their own meaning and knowledge with peers through social interactions. Corsaro explains that this kind of learning he observed was both productive and reproductive. In other words, children's knowledge increased in density and continually underwent reorganization. He stresses that, because learning is of a social constructive nature, peer interactions are vitally important to the learning process. And in

order to assess learning progress, it is important to make social interactions among children the basis of learning assessment observations.

If we believe that learning is social, then it is important to structure learning settings that are conducive to the 'peer culture.' Corsaro provides some valuable guidelines to consider when organizing a learning setting. Though his work was done with pre-school children, I think his insights have relevance for learning settings of all age groups.

The importance of boundaries-

Corsaro stresses the need for boundaries in the instructional setting. These include, but are not limited to, adult ideas, materials, rules and restrictions. These can be the boundaries or frames within which peer culture can develop. Corsaro explains that classroom organization..."is not an issue of structure vs. non-structure, but of boundary maintenance" (p.289). As children 'bump' up against these boundaries they engage in a learning opportunity.

How are boundaries determined? They derive from adult standards and take into consideration issues of fairness, civility, and subject content to be learned. For example, a teacher might impose a sharing requirement when a child is being isolated and excluded by peers during play time.

Based on his research, Corsaro identified hallmarks of a successful classroom: He stresses the need for structured, adult directed, activities. There should be plenty of opportunities for spontaneous play. There should be numerous instances of boundary contact between child and adult. The inside and outside areas should be divided into sub areas that are set up to promote teacher directed activities or spontaneous peer play. The learning setting should contain props which encourage a range of activities for groups of varying sizes. Finally, the school day should be set up into periods where free play, teacher directed activities and group meetings occur on a specific schedule.

Assessment--

Corsaro stresses that systematic observation is essential. Teachers need to gather information collected from children as they interact in their natural context. During set observation times the teacher can estimate frequency and effectiveness of boundary contacts. This information can be the basis of curriculum development, evaluation and refinement.

Corsaro offers the following observation guidelines.

1) Determine a set time
2) Predetermine the definition of an interaction.
   -decide on representative range of activities during which time children will be observed.
   -If needs or problems arise, observations can be tailored to address specific questions.
3) Consider a range of questions which will guide the assessment.

It is valuable to look carefully at classrooms where spontaneous talk and social interactions flourish. The lessons learned there help instruct how we shape classrooms where children learn successfully and pleasurable. We need to assess our own classrooms to determine whether children have opportunities to determine the use of space and time in classroom learning situations? If they do, what do they choose to do and to talk about? We also need to consider what classroom structures--temporal, spatial, political--foster opportunities for independent decision making and academic self-determination for children?

As educators we need to reflect on the role we have in creating and maintaining learning environments that allow children rich learning opportunities which, by definition, include elements of spontaneity, collaboration, play, choice and the freedom to communicate by employing their own cultural understandings.

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